

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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STARK INTRODUCES BILL TO IMPROVE MEDICARE'S MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS

WASHINGTON, DC – Today, Rep. Pete Stark (D-CA) introduced the Medicare Mental Health Modernization Act, legislation to establish parity for mental and physical illnesses in Medicare and expand access to mental health services for seniors and people with disabilities. Companion legislation is being introduced by Senator Jon Corzine in the U.S. Senate.

“Our bill responds to the simple fact that quality, comprehensive health care requires more than just treatment for physical ailments,” Stark said. “The current debate over our nation's veterans access to mental health care highlights the fact that mental ailments are equally serious and need to be treated. The Medicare Mental Health Modernization Act will improve Medicare's mental health benefit to meet today's standards of care.”

One in five members of our senior population display mental difficulties that are not part of the normal aging process. In primary care settings, over a third of senior citizens demonstrate symptoms of depression. Older adults also have the highest rate of suicide of any segment of our population. Most Medicare beneficiaries with a disability suffer from mental illness. However, the current structure of Medicare mental health benefits is inadequate to address these needs and limits access to essential treatment.

“There is no room for discrimination in our healthcare system,” said Senator Jon S. Corzine. “Mental illness is a serious and often life-threatening disease, and this legislation helps fulfill Medicare's promise to all of its patients - including those in need of mental health treatment.”

The Medicare Mental Health Modernization Act improves the Medicare benefits in several important areas. The bill:

- * Establishes equal coverage for mental and physical illness.
- * Eliminates the 190-day lifetime cap on inpatient services in psychiatric hospitals and reduces the 50% co-pay for outpatient mental health services to the 20% level enjoyed by most other Part B medical services.

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- * Expands beneficiary access to a range of community-based residential and outpatient services that provide state-of-the-art mental health treatment.

- * Addresses the shortage of qualified mental health professionals serving older Americans by allowing state licensed marriage and family therapists and mental health counselors to provide Medicare-covered services and expanding nursing home residents' access to clinical social work services.

- * Requires the Secretary of Health and Human Services to conduct a study to examine whether the Medicare criteria to cover therapeutic services to beneficiaries with Alzheimer's and related cognitive disorders discriminates by being too restrictive.

This bill has received support from more than 40 organizations including: the National Mental Health Association, the American Association of Geriatric Psychiatry, the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, the American Counseling Association, the American Mental Health Counselors Association, the American Psychological Association, the National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors and the Clinical Social Work Federation.

Rep. Stark concluded, "When Medicare was created in 1965, mental health treatment was very different than it is today. Over the years, Congress has updated Medicare's benefits as the practice of medicine has changed. Clearly, it is past time for us to take this action with regard to Medicare's coverage of mental health treatments. Our bill gives seniors and the disabled access to the up-to-date and affordable mental health services they desperately need."